Effective integration of instructional technology in learning environments is the unicorn of successful curriculum design and implementation. Yet, one can almost hear the groans during discussions on the benefits of incorporating technology into lesson plans and curricula. Often the pitch as to what technology can do for learners and educators is more aspirational than real, and the actual execution of tech in the classroom is all too frequently overwhelming, finicky, and unreliable.

Indeed, one colleague equated embracing all the tech that is available for teaching and learning languages as attempting to drink from a firehose. YouTube? Blogs? Podcasts? Apps? Online periodicals? The proliferation of innovative instructional ideas is dizzying to say the least.

Why then complicate already demanding classrooms by crossing into cyber worlds? The answer is easy: social media is an ideal tool for enhancing language learning. The wealth of connective resources within the peer-sharing world makes it easier than ever before for instructors to connect the dots between the existence, prevalence, and applicability of world languages inside and outside of the classroom well beyond a focus on just pieces of language (e.g., conjugation charts, vocabulary flash cards, and grammar quizzes). It also involves utilizing the realms (Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, etc.) and the lingo (vocabulary, hashtags, and even emojis) most familiar to our students.

I recently started incorporating social media-based technology for all proficiency levels of my Spanish language classes. An experiment for sure, but one that with constant monitoring and tweaking confirmed my hypothesis that current iterations of several peer-sharing resources can and should augment the language learning experience. While technology and the capabilities of social media excite me as an educator, I still do not advocate simply using tech for tech’s sake, but rather using it to support the inclusion of what are already staples of most millennial interactions. Each activity below reflects my quest to employ digital platforms as purposeful tools.

**Instagram Scavenger Hunt**

My institution is located in a rural setting where interaction with native speakers of languages other than English is limited. The constant challenge is to achieve as much authenticity and applicability as possible, particularly for students at the Novice and Intermediate levels of proficiency.

Instagram has proven to be a particularly effective platform, especially considering that Spanish is its second most widely used language. There are two particular objectives for which I have used this tool: to create a non-traditional space where language practice might occur, and to connect students to real, native speakers.

For the first, open an Instagram account by visiting [www.instagram.com](http://www.instagram.com) and creating a user name. Mine is “HolaProfThomas.” Students then search for this user name and “follow” you. Once you accept their requests to follow, your students will be able to tag you in subsequent posts using the “@” symbol followed by your user name (@HolaProfThomas). Instagram is particularly useful when you want to design an activity that gets students up and moving inside or outside of the classroom.

**Three Ways to Use Instagram**

- Design a scavenger hunt of 10 to 15 items (chalkboard, bulletin board, textbook, etc.), people (a colleague, secretary, principal, etc.), or places (bookstore, library, cafeteria, sports field, etc.) around the school, related to the language that you are teaching or a specific topic. The scavenger hunt steps should serve as part of the language challenge (formal and informal commands work well). Have students identify each item, person, or place, snap a picture, and then “post” them on Instagram. Students type a sentence under each image in the target language, thus employing appropriate vocabulary and verbs in the tense(s) of interest. To track their results, have students include your user name and the @ symbol with each post so that each image is immediately visible to you, and
encourage students to comment on each other’s posts. You can create hashtags (#) such as #ProfAThomasBusqueda or #ProfAThomasClase101 as another useful way to assemble your students’ posts.

- The second Instagram activity leverages Instagram’s massive, global, peer-to-peer sharing platform to discuss how social media operates elsewhere in the world and learn technology vocabulary such as target language equivalents for “brb,” “lol,” and “omg,” among many others. I often introduce such topics by first viewing cortos (short films) such as “Hyper-Reality,” “Teclópolis,” and “Lista para la cita,” or songs like “Celular Manía,” “Yo no quiero Facebook,” and “Twitter.” There are probably equivalents in many other languages. Each serves as a launching pad for the discussion of several aspects of social media (the good, the bad, and everything in between).

- Another good way to use Instagram is to encourage students to follow particular Insta-personalities who post in the target language. In Spanish these include @instagramenes, @natgeoesp, @wawawiwadesign, and @luisitocomunica. Students can identify and summarize posts, discuss how the posters are using language, and even send messages of their own to engage in authentic virtual dialogue. My students were flabbergasted to discover an entire world of Spanish-speaking Instagram content creators and hashtags, and this is true of every world language.

Facebook World Reporting
To up the ante in advanced reading, writing, and vocabulary acquisition, a group news project using Facebook proved to be an ideal way to complement the literary and abstract grammar concepts covered in the textbook with examples of authentic written language in action.

Open an account on Facebook and create a profile. This will allow you to design and administer a private group page, accessible only to you and your students. Do this by clicking on the “Group” option under “Create” located on the left side of the Newsfeed. The “Group” feature allows you to control who is able to join and exit the group and overall privacy settings.

Then create a list of several reputable online news sites in the target language. For example, for Spanish I use the New York Times Edición-Español (nytimes.com/es), El Huffington Post (huffingtonpost.es), CNN en español (cnnespanol.cnn.com), El País (España) and El País (América). Have students go to the news sites that you have listed to locate an article of interest on a specific country, region, or topic of interest. Students must then post a brief summary of and personal reaction to their selected article (make sure they share the link!). They should also comment on at least two of their peers’ posts. Your class can create a weekly, ongoing, virtual dialogue about current events, doing so entirely in the target language.

Two to Tell
The “Two to Tell” competition is an innovative YouTube project created by Professor Emeritus Ana María Wiseman of Wofford College. In my version of this, students select a cultural topic on a theme that piqued their interest during the term. Topics have ranged from the Cuban vintage car economy to Machu Picchu to arte callejero (street art), with many others in between.

The challenge is to limit the Two to Tell presentations to only six slides, each shown for just 20 seconds. This is daunting for most students, forcing them to speak as concisely as possible in a very short period of time while still relaying the most vital information. To prepare, have students practice different ways of presenting information—as a sequence, as an explanation, as a story—with prompts provided by you. We spend a week on each of these in my three-day-a-week class. When it is time to compile their projects, students must use visuals as creatively as possible to serve as a dynamic backdrop to their voice overlay. I highly recommend the design app Adobe Spark for this—it is easy to learn to use and creates vibrant content. The result is an inventive short film created exclusively by the students posted on YouTube.

Final Thoughts
Rather than study a culture from a sterile distance, these tools help immerse students in emotive content that adds character and personality, fostering a more intimate understanding of, connection to, and curiosity about that culture. Students are able to delve into contemporary topics of interest to them in meaningful ways that simply would not otherwise be possible at an isolated school location or through traditional, one-dimensional materials that too often reduce complex cultures to superficial stereotypes.

Social media platforms and peer-to-peer sharing offer unique opportunities for educators to engage with students within their digital worlds and expose them to the vibrancy of native language speakers all around them and around the world. Innovative language instruction is greatly facilitated by Instagram, Facebook, and apps such as Adobe Spark. With a bit of ingenuity, enthusiasm and, of course, supervision, you and your students will create visual and oral evidence of their linguistic and cultural progress.
Websites to Watch

Blended Play
blendedplay.com

Blended Play is an online gaming portal where teachers review content in any subject through games displayed on a projector or an interactive whiteboard. Teachers enter questions and answers and determine game length, and these are incorporated into one of five ready-made games: three race games, one board discovery game, and one board domination game. Read a firsthand account from the French teacher who began the project at blendedplay.com/about-us.html.

Teaching Endangered Languages
tribalingual.com

The mission of Tribalingual is to facilitate the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Focusing on the preservation of endangered languages, the website enables teachers from communities around the world to teach to an international audience, thereby spreading and preserving culture and providing a salary and meaning to remote communities. Courses available include Malagasy, Ainu, Gangte, Mongolian, Yoruba, Greko, Ladino, and more. The site also features a blog highlighting endangered languages and cultures.

Listen Up! Language-Related Podcasts

Coffee Break Languages (radiolingua.com)
Radio Lingua’s Coffee Break podcast series provides lessons in Spanish, French, German, Italian, and Chinese that last as long as a cup of coffee (or a similarly short chunk of free time). Although the name and format may suggest a limited focus on basic vocabulary and phrases, the lessons are really designed to help listeners work toward increasing language proficiency. Advanced lessons are currently only available in Spanish and French.

The Fluent Show (www.fluent.show)
The Fluent Show describes itself as “a podcast all about loving, living, and learning languages.” Although the show doesn’t focus on teaching a specific language, it can help get nearly anyone in the spirit of language learning. There is an emphasis on helping listeners get through the types of challenges that arise while learning a new language. The hosts and their expert guests offer plenty of helpful, widely applicable advice, and are very enthusiastic. Recent topics include learning multiple languages at once, finding language-learning communities, and moving past the intermediate plateau.

What’s That App?

Classting
classting.com

Classting is an example of a social media platform and learning management system (LMS) that works much like Edmodo, Schoology, and Canvas. The free app allows teachers, students, and parents to share class-related notices, conversations, and materials on virtual classroom pages. One unique feature of Classting of special interest to language educators is the Class Exchange. By exchanging with other Classting classes, students could enjoy additional opportunities to practice using the target language with native speakers. Available on the Apple App Store and Google Play.

Chinese Skill
chinese-skill.com/cs.html

This game-based, task-driven app helps simplify the learning of the Chinese language for beginners. Listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills are emphasized throughout the process. Both Traditional and Simplified Chinese are supported, giving users control over which system of characters to learn. Chinese handwriting, characters, and pronunciation are all simplified to help ease learners’ way into this language. Available on the Apple App Store and Google Play.

Beelinguapp
beelinguapp.com

Beelinguapp empowers learners to read a second language by showing the exact same text in two languages, side by side. At the same time, it is an audiobook, and with its unique karaoke reading, learners follow the audio in the text on both sides. There are many texts available in 13 languages: Spanish, English, German, Portuguese, Korean, French, Hindi, Russian, Turkish, Chinese, Arabic, Italian, Japanese. The texts range from fairy tales, to news, to science papers and novels, and new ones are added every week. Available on the Apple App Store and Google Play.